

## SANTA MARIA DEGLI ANGELI AND THE PALAZZO MASSIMO (NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ROME)



The Baths of Diocletian dictate the shape of the Piazza della Repubblica. Santa Maria degli Angeli is built inside the *frigidarium* and the church was designed by Michelangelo in 1563, a year before his death. It has no true façade, as the main entrance is set within one of the apses.

Even allowing for the fact that Michelangelo raised the floor in keeping with the floor level of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the proportions of the church give some idea of the sheer scale of Roman Imperial architecture. Eight of the huge pink-granite pillars are originals from the Baths.

In 1702 Pope Clement XI commissioned a meridian line, a sort of sundial, in the basilica. This was because he wanted to check the accuracy of the Gregorian calendar, to produce a tool to predict Easter exactly, and, (not least) to beat the one recently built in Bologna.

This church was chosen for several reasons:

- (1) Like other baths in Rome, the building faced south;
- (2) the height of the walls allowed for a long line to measure the sun's progress through the year more precisely;
- (3) the ancient walls had long since stopped settling into the ground, ensuring that carefully calibrated observational instruments set in them would not move out of place;
- (4) as it was set in the former baths of Diocletian, it would symbolically represent a victory of the Christian calendar over the earlier pagan calendar.



Bianchini's gnomon projects the sun's image onto his line just before solar noon.

The line was made along the meridian that crosses Rome, at longitude 12° 30' E. At solar noon, the sun shines through a small hole in the wall to cast its light on this line each day.

The longer the meridian line, the more accurately the observer can calculate the length of the year. This meridian line is 45 metres long and is composed of bronze, enclosed in yellow-white marble.

In addition to using the line to measure the sun's meridian crossing, Bianchini also added holes in the ceiling to mark the passage of stars. The meridian line was restored in 2002 for the tricentenary of its construction, and it is still operational today.

The exit from the church leads to another remnant of the Baths: the Aula Ottagona, which contained underground furnaces for heating water for the baths and now displays statues.

Founded in 1889, the **MUSEO NAZIONALE ROMANO** holds most of the antiquities found in Rome since 1870. There are five different branches of the museum in different parts of Rome.

In the basement is a collection of coins and jewellery, on the next floors there are statues of Emperors as well as Roman copies of Greek original statues, and even the fittings from the pleasure barges belonging to the Emperor Caligula.

The statue of the goddess Diana by the entrance makes a great impact because it shows that ancient statues were actually very colourful, not plain bronze or marble as they appear today.

Augustus is here dressed as Pontifex Maximus - (he appears with a different image in the Prima Porta statue in the Vatican museums). Next is a Roman copy of a Greek "Venus Pudica" type. The goddess is trying to cover herself modestly. You can find another Venus statue in this museum, which was originally displayed in the Emperor Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, a crouching Venus. Number 3 is a dying Niobid: from the story that the children of Niobe were killed by Diana in a rage because their mother boasted of having seven children whereas Diana's mother only had two. The seated bronze statue is of a boxer, and you can see his scarred face and metal knuckle-dusters. *Discobolos* is the name of the next, a Roman copy of a Greek original.



There are also statues of many other members of the Imperial family, and several of Antinous who was a young friend of the Emperor Hadrian.

Then some stunning mosaics, including this one of a charioteer



- but the jewels of the collection are frescoes from a villa belonging to Livia, the wife of the Emperor Augustus. She retired to the villa after Augustus' death. Roman frescoes were painted directly onto the plaster as soon as it had been put onto the wall, while it was still wet. This gives a distinctive texture to the painting and makes it part of the wall. The Empress must have felt as if sitting out in a garden among these trees with their luscious fruit and brightly coloured birds flitting about.

These are the best-preserved frescoes anywhere in the Roman Empire.